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Partition and Violence: Shifting Intercommunal Relations in Chaman Nahal's *Azadi*

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Abstract:

Partition brought death to millions of people in 1947. Before the trauma of Partition people lived together cordially. There was no disharmony, hatred and tension between them. However, the declaration of Partition in June 1947 touched off brutal violence across the country. It filled people with fear and hatred. It also forced them to leave their native place for safer places. For this calamity, Chaman Nahal holds responsible to the English government as well as to the greedy politicians; and the politicians' nexus with the government officials are also equally questioned by the writer. Favouring Gandhian Ideology, the paper presents the view that religion is one's personal affair. The religious distinction between the people is not responsible for communal riots. Religion is not an underlying cause of communal violence. But, violence lies in the politics of some interested groups.

Keywords: Partition, Religion, Communal Violence, Politician, Partition Award, Communal Harmony.

Partition was an end to a new beginning but the end was infernal. It brought to death to millions of people, stripped off thousands of women of their honour and left many more children orphaned. Cartography changed the things; borders tore apart the lives of people. Riots which followed the independence have been fictionalised. Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956), Atia Hussain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961), Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964), Intizar Hussain's *Basti* (1975) are some monumental novels in the same vein. Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* (1975) is a moving saga with graphic details of the division of Indian subcontinent into two nations – India and Pakistan, and as a consequence disaster that hit these two newly declared independent countries in 1947. Besides a cruelty and perversity that we get in this chronicle novel, it also contains a well executed and gripping narrative, clearly realised with readily identifiable characters and a kind of grisly, macabre atmosphere that has its own sharp appeal.

The novel *Azadi* opens when Lala Kanshi Ram (popularly known as Lalaji), a wholesale grain-merchant of Sialkot city (now in Pakistani part of Punjab), looks deeply worried about the partition announcement that the Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, is to make on June 3rd 1947. This announcement suddenly forces to the people, who speak a common

tongue and wear identical clothes, to become conscious about their religious identity of being Hindu, Muslim or Sikh. It divides them into majority or minority community. The feeling of hostility naturally runs high all over the country.

The novel deals with the general life of Sialkot city. Lalaji's family is in the focus of the novel. Lalaji and his wife Prabharani, their children Arun, Madhu; and younger daughter Bibi Amar Vati, her husband Gangu Mull: their son Suraj Prakash; and daughter-in-law Sunanda Bala; Chaudhari Barkat Ali, his son Munir and daughter Nur are major characters of the novel. Before the trauma of Partition they lived together cordially and there was no disharmony, hatred and tension between the communities. Such as, for a long time every year on the festival of *Dussehra* effigies were being made by the Muslim workmen: "Huge effigies of Ravana and his evil associates were burnt on that ground each year. It was a Hindu festival but the effigies were made by Muslim workmen; the crackers and fireworks too were supplied by the Muslims" (93).

The partition award caused brutal violence in Punjab and people of different communities brought to a situation where their normal life almost came to a standstill. Though earlier, they were living cordially for such a long time, but this award instilled fear in their mind, hence most of them decided to leave their homes, and departed for the safer places. The novelist delineates the massive and unprecedented violence of those troubled days. The turn of the events makes everyone feel that the civil war is a foregone conclusion. The writer makes the point that this historic announcement has created a huge gap between the communities. Therefore, having heard the news of Partition the Hindus and the Sikhs, on the one hand, are full of annoyance and suspicion, as Lalaji says to his neighbours: "I suppose we'll continue here. Why can't Hindus and Sikhs live in Pakistan? Why should they wish us harm?" (66). On the other hand, Muslims are very much happy. Therefore, they celebrate the news with processions and bursting of fire-crackers and illuminations. This shifting of mutual relationship can be understood through another example as well, before this award the inter-religious love-affair between Arun and Nur was not objected by any of the Muslim students. However, "Their classmates had long known of their romance, but after the announcement of Pakistan they had become suspect" (91). Partition changed the mentality of people. In such type of conditions people are infused with communal thinking. This narrow mindedness always hampers the progress of any society/country and sows the seeds of hatred and disharmony between the communities. In the novel, through Arun and Nur, the writer makes fun of such type of imposed restriction on inter-religious love affair and even marriage. Nahal is against to this narrow-mindedness and orthodoxy of people. It is mostly created and imposed by religious fundamentalists. That hampers the progress of the society as well as nation.

Violence was the indifferent part of Partition. It was one of the cruellest realities of this tragedy. Nobody can deny it. Mass murder, looting and burning of movable and immovable properties and atrocities against women were some of the bad consequences of it. This situation became worst because of mass migration of people from one part of the country to another. This sudden shifting of population created a lot of problems for people. Further, the mismanagement and lack of transportation had made the situation worst. There were large

scale of killings, lootings and burning of properties across different cities of Punjab e.g. in Lahore, Gunjawala, Amritsar, Ambala, Rawalpindi, Multan and so forth. The first riot took place on 24th June, 1947 in Sialkot. Lalaji was scared of thinking about the communal incidents because it was horrible to survive for the minorities. He did not want to leave his native place where he was born, brought up and lived so far. His had an emotional attachment with the soil of Sialkot. Partition made him refugee in his own home. Till now he was not familiar with refugee, and when he knew, he got infuriated and wondered: “Refugee, refugee, indeed! He shouted when he had understood the word. I was born around here; this is my home how can I be a refugee in my own home?” (130). The definition of home is being questioned by the writer that how a person becomes refugee in his own homeland. What are those factors which determine the boundary line for mass? And why they are changed with the passage of time. What are the determining factors for cartography: religion, caste, language, culture or land? We will have to think over these questions and also search out the answers.

Lalaji runs a wholesale-grain-shop. He does not want to leave his *matribhoomi* at any cost. Therefore, Hindu-Muslim animosity perturbs him deeply. He always favours cordial relationship between the two communities. At any cost, he wants to stay in Sialkot. However, if situation forces him to depart after some time he will return, once riots and animosity will be over. Moreover, he is also ready to forgive the sins of the Muslims and the English, whatever they have done the atrocities over the Hindus. He is ready to forgive: “if only he could return. Return and die here and he cremated by the side of river Aik!” (148). On the one hand, Nahal holds responsible to the English government and, on the other hand, to the greedy politicians, who were playing politics for their wasted interests, but not for the sake of the nation. Lalaji has the opinion that the nexus between the government officials and the politicians – who were not loyal to their roles and responsibilities – were equally responsible for the massacre across the country. As he says to Bill Davidson: “You were our *sirkar* (government), I and millions gave you our complete loyalty. While striking a deal with these ‘leaders’, did you ever think of us? Freedom to be sure, we welcome it. But why the violence?” (148-49). If there was no other alternative to the partition, the writer is ready to accept it but only ‘Partition minus violence’. Nahal is not ready to accept violence at any cost. “Why violence had happened, that is the question?” – Through Lalaji the writer poses this question in the novel. Neither the award of Partition was appropriate, nor was the only solution of misunderstanding between the majority (Hindu) and the minority (Muslim) communities of the nation. Moreover, it was not the right answer to the Muslims’ misconception that after the freedom from the clutches of the British, they will be once again ruled by ‘the others’ i. e. Hindus. Muslims had the apprehension that they will be suppressed again in the hands of the Hindus. This apprehension was misused by the greedy politicians as a tool to favour Pakistan as their separate homeland for Muslims. These politicians connected their movement of Pakistan with people’s emotions and feelings. They easily infused in people’s mind that their religious freedom as well as existence would be danger, if the demand of separate home land for Muslims would not be fulfilled. Here we can say that the demand of separate homeland was political but not religious. However, politicians gave it the religious colour; and they mixed politics with religion very shrewdly. Here, it is necessary to

understand that religion is one's personal affair rather than public. One should not mix it up with politics. As Bipan Chandra says: "religion must be separated from politics, economy and education, and (be) treated as a private or personal affair (70)". When we politicise religion and mix it up with politics, it leads to communal politics. This is a threat to any progressive society which hampers the development of any nation-state. Therefore, the real role of religion in one's life is to show the right path of love, peace, cooperation, harmony and other ethical values rather than hatred and disharmony with the followers of the other religion. "Religion not only binds its followers together but also provides them with a system of beliefs, rituals, institutions, traditions and a sense of sacred. It also gives meaning to their life and a way of relating themselves to the universe and its creator" (Engineer 701). It gives them a sense of divine. Religion, in Indian society, has played a great role in the development of humanity. It has laid emphasis on some values and standards and has formulated principles for the guidance of human life, and at the same time, "it has also propagated some set norms and principles and encouraged some ceremonies and rituals and practices, the impact of which on human life has not discontinued even after the attainment of independence" (Agrawal and Sinha 185-86).

The novel favours Gandhian Ideology of taking religion as one's personal affair, which does not create a hurdle for the bondage of good relationship among people. In the novel, Rahmat Ali follows this philosophy. He opines that by birth people are one; the differences are created by the people for their vested interests, but not for the sake of betterment of humanity/society. He is not in favour of Lalaji's departure for India. Therefore, during his departure, he utters: "we are one people and religion can't separate us from each other" (276). Barkat Ali's opinion can be correlated with Gandhji's perception of Hindu-Muslim unity in India. This unity is the need of the time to mobilise both the communities against the British government. He says: "we should work unitedly, forgetting our religious discord, and each Hindu should take one Muslim as his brother and *vice-versa*" (276). People should fight against the British jointly. But they should not fight amongst themselves. Unfortunately it could not happen and India was divided on the line of religion.

The writer criticises the view that during the partition days all Muslims were in favour of communal disharmony and violence in Pakistani Punjab. In the novel, Barkat Ali always favours secular value; he is worried about the safety of minorities' lives and their properties in Pakistan. He is always ready to provide maximum help to them. During the chaos, he intends to provide the shelter "at least Lala Kanshi Ram and his family to his house, but he knew that won't do. There would be no safety for them there, and his Muslim neighbours would plague him for life" (141). Hence, this apprehension about the minorities' safety forces Barkat Ali to do every possible help to them. Therefore, he is perturbed by the violence and its support by his Muslim brothers. He regrets over the news of looting of Lalaji's shop.

I'm sorry about it.... I wish to Allah it was my house to be looted. All my arguments for peace have failed with my Muslim brothers; they have ceased to be Muslims and have become Shaitan's. (138)

Partition had left the people in dilemma and uncertainty. They were not in the condition to decide that they should depart from their native place, where they were born and brought up and living for generations. If they will depart for India all their belongings, business and home will be left in Sialkot. They will have to start fresh life to settle in India. If they decide to remain in this city, there is no certainty of their lives and properties without adoption of Islam. Therefore, some people have departed for India to start their new life. They prefer their religion over their native place and property. However, some of them have chosen to convert themselves into Islam. Gangu Mull is one of them who embraces Islam and deserts his family members, to stay in Pakistan. When convoy of people is ready to depart Gangu Mull, who was missing since last few days, suddenly presents there with other Muslim members. Lalaji calls him: Gangu Mull, he ironically responds: “what’s the meaning of this Gangu Mull? I’m Gangu Mull no more, I am Gulam Mohammad. The man was laughing, but his voice was unsteady, embarrassed at the admission” (279). Gangu defends his decision:

‘But turning a Muslim?’

‘Why not? What would India have given me?’

‘and now?’

‘Now I own my buildings in Fort Streets.’

‘You don’t say.’

‘Well they were my property; I have decided to stay on here as a Muslim, and will continue to retain my property.’(270)

Violence was the worst outcome of Partition, which compelled people to depart for safer place across the border; because they were worried about their safety. Once they departed from their homes, the plight of people in the refugee convoys was rigorous and painful. The threatening attacks of Muslim mob were common and each night convoy-men wait breathlessly in fear. Hence most of men, due to the imminent attack over the convoy, did not sleep even in the nights. Women are always soft target for attackers in communal violence. They, therefore, become the worst sufferer in such type of violence. Men always deeply worry about the security of women. As in the novel, when the convoy reached at ‘Quila Shobha Singh Camp’, the convoy men observed that Mrs. Chander Bhan’s two daughters, aged nineteen and seventeen had been carried away by the mob. Other people had similar shocking stories, awaiting them about their acquaintances. The Hindu and the Sikh women, who were abducted by the Muslim mob, were all physically and mentally tortured, molested and mostly raped. Just after the attack on the convoy, the plight of women was indescribable:

The rape was followed by other atrocities, chopping of the breasts, and even death. Many of the pregnant women had their wombs torn open. The survivors were retained for repeated rapes and humiliations, until they were parcelled out to decrepit wrecks – the aged, the leftovers who couldn’t find a wife, or those Muslims who wanted additional wife. (293)

This is totally inhuman that even after the repeated rape of the abducted women and girls of the Hindu and Sikh community, they were forced to perform a stark naked procession into the streets of Pakistan. They were between sixteen to thirty years old. Their arms were free but

their spirits were crushed, their morale shattered, none of them made any attempt to cover themselves with their hands. The graphic description of their plight was:

They were all stripped off their clothes. Their heads were completely shaven; so were their armpits, they looked like baby girls, or like the bald embryos one sees preserved in methylated spirit. Only the breasts and the hips gave away the age. The women walked awkwardly, looking only at them. They were all crying, though their eyes shed no tears. Their faces were formed into grimaces and they were sobbing. (296)

Such type of processions was common during those days. After seeing inhuman naked procession of Hindu and Sikh women, Hakim Sahib, a doctor, almost revived and his eyes opened wide. He covered his face with his hands and shocked: “Allah, Allah, Allah! And then he knelt on his knees, raised his arms and spread his hands before Him as while saying namaaz. There was the look of infinite pain on his face, and moving his outstretched hands, like begging alms”, he murmured in Punjabi. “Rabbul Alamin, forgive these cruel men. And oh, my Allah, oh Rabbah, protect these women!” (298). Here Hakim Sahib shows his humanistic perception.

The role of bureaucracy is also questioned by the writer. The Pakistani officers were not unbiased and loyal towards their duty. They, not only acquiesced the heinous crime of the Muslim mob, but also indirectly involved into that. As in the novel, Caption Rahmat-Ullah Khan, an army officer, who was enticed towards Sunanda (daughter-in-law of Bibi Amar Vati) often visited her camp. Further, when the convoy was attacked by the mob, Rahmat could not resist himself for his pent up yearnings for Sunanda. Ultimately, he succeeded to abduct and spoiled her chastity.

At last, I can say that *Azadi* deals with the vivid description of plight of the masses at the time of Partition in 1947. There was violence, butchery, accounts of rape, murder, slaughtering of Hindu and Sikh people, riots and rampage in the novel, but human suffering becomes intense and profound, as individual families were all affected by these in one or another. This novel surely enjoys more creative freedom a utopia of *Ram-Rajya*, disrupting several deeply rooted and ingrained constructs related to religion. It seems to suggest religion which functioned once to smooth the lives of men and to make it more convenient suddenly becomes the devastating cause of thousands of killing and carnage. It also foregrounds the need for the *gandhian notion* of azadi or purn-swaraj which is never possible unless we think of religion as a voice of conscience or *chetna* with an ethical sense of justice not an emotional response to irrational faiths. Unfolding many personal stories the novel seems to stress the importance of existence over the essence with its realities and sordid experiences.

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